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ABSTRACT

A child development course was offered as a web-based, asynchronous distance learning course by the Department of Family and Child Development in the College of Human Resources and Education at Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University during summer 1996. The course was initiated to respond to the demand for flexible distance learning opportunities and take advantage of changing trends in higher education in terms of technology-based learning experience. This paper describes the course organization, content, and processes involved in its delivery. Lessons learned include: (1) multiple presentation modes offer the opportunity to design learning experiences that are closely matched to learning objectives; (2) students need easy access to a computer specialist who can offer technical support; (3) group dynamics in asynchronous listserv discussions mimic real-time face-to-face interactions; (4) asynchronous learning activities offer increased flexibility for adult learners, but also require either self-regulated, self-directed learners or strict deadlines monitored by the instructor; (5) self-directed learning skills need to be examined in conjunction with on-line teaching strategies; (6) distance education graduate courses for adult learners can be exciting and successful; (7) technical problems at the beginning tend to diminish later, and asynchronous conferencing leads to problems with deadlines; (8) on-line courses require two to three times more delivery time; and (9) while the class was successful with 13 students, it may be more difficult to maintain a sense of community and manage communications with a larger class size. (Contains 16 references.) (SWC)

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SUCCESSES AND LESSONS LEARNED IN AN ON-LINE COURSE ON SOCIOEMOTIONAL DEVELOPMENT

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INTRODUCTION:

A 3-credit course in child development (http://infoserver.etl.vt.edu/~/FCD/fcd5224/) was offered as a web-based, asynchronous distance learning course by the Department of Family and Child Development (http://www.chre.vt.edu/~/fcd/fcd.html) in the College of Human Resources and Education (http://www.chre.vt.edu/) at Virginia Tech (http://www.vt.edu/) during Summer 1996. The course was initiated to respond to the demand for flexible distance learning opportunities and take advantage of changing trends in higher education in terms of technology-based learning experiences (Simonson, 1996). The professor, a veteran of traditional resident instruction adapted the course for on-line teaching by reformatting materials and adopting multiple modes of communication. This paper describes the organization, content, and processes involved. Several successes and limitations are noted, and recommendations are made for future courses and for research agendas.

THE INDIVIDUALS

The students, the professor, a computer specialist, and four volunteer electronic mentors were the players in this web-based learning arena. The students (N=15) were enrolled in graduate degree programs in a variety of areas including Counseling, Adult Education, Child Development, Psychology, and Agricultural Economics. By profession, the students included: Extension Agents (N=6); Counselors/Therapists (N=5); School Administrators (N-2); a Teacher (N=1); and an Adult Education Program Specialist (N=1). Two enrollees had disabilities which had made it difficult for them to attend and complete traditional on-campus courses. Three of those enrolled lived in remote rural regions of Virginia.

Students were extremely diverse in terms of their dispositions toward and previous experiences in self-directed learning. While the majority of the class met deadlines for listserv discussions and used the flexible deadlines for "homework" and project work, others became lost with the freedom to delay assignments. Of those who delayed assignments (about 6), half did so in order to probe more deeply into some topic of interest. The other three became "lost" and have not yet completed the course. A grade of "I" (Incomplete) was assigned. These students have received encouragement from the instructor and are free to call or e-mail for assistance at any time. One of the three continues to progress --albeit slowly. The status of students with "I" grades raises a number of philosophical issues. However, it points most

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directly to a corroboration of research indicating that students who participate in asynchronous distance-learning experiences are most likely to succeed if they are self-disciplined (motivated (Broderick & Caverly, 1996; Gordon, 1996; Harasim, 1996; Kerka, 1996; Schrum, 1995 ; Seagren, 1996; Tagg & Arreola, 1996; Vermuntk, 1996). Much work needs to be done to determine how to enable students to develop self-discipline. Current work on engendering success among undergraduates (O-Keefe & Berger, 1993) needs to be examined in terms of its applicability to adult learners.

The professor had 25 years of higher education teaching experience in the field of child development. She also had a physical impairment which provided the motivation for operating in the asynchronous mode--a mode which permitted flexible scheduling. The professor's stated philosophy of education was particularly suited to asynchronous, multi-media modes of learning.

Basic values articulated by the professor included the following:

*Congruence between principles of developmentally appropriate educational practice for young learners and for adult learners.

*Responsisveness to physical, intellectual, psychosocial developmental processes as they occur in the learners, particularly as related to career development.

*Responsiveness to individuals' interests, cultural backgrounds, and special needs in the professional context.

*Opportunity to maximize the experience of "flow" (intrinsically motivated; sense of well-being as described by Csikszentmihayli, 1975) by supporting self-directed learning .

*Self-directed learning supported through (1) choices regarding level of learning challenges, and (2) flexible deadlines for submission of assignments.

*Dispositions of "playfulness" and "risk-taking" which support exploration of new concepts and modes of learning.

*Trust among community of learners.

*Respect for and accommodation to learner styles/dispositions.

*Learning which places the learner's "self" at the center of the experience.

The availability of a computer specialist was indicated in the literature. First, the importance of technical training and orientation and access to technical support was pointed out by Kerka (1996). The importance of access to computers (Harasim, 1991) and technical skills prior to enrollment was indicated in other studies (Broderick & Caverly, 1996; Harasim, 1991; Schrum, 1995).The computer specialist for this course was an employee of the College of Human Resources and Education, provided technical support in several modes including (1) telephone consultations, (2) hands-on laboratory training in basic e-mail and internet usage, and (3) an on-line tutorial (http://infoserver.etl.vt.edu/~/FCD/fcd5224/details.html#TechnicalSupport). The technical training was available for two weeks prior to the beginning of the course. Support was available at all times during the course. The experiences in this course corroborated findings by Harasim (1991) that technical problems at the beginning, tend to diminish later and that asynchronous conferencing leads to problems with deadlines.

Electronic mentors included (1) a colleague in the Department offering the course, (2) a professor from a similar department in

another university, (3) a high school principal with a special interest in supporting the socioemotional development of adolescents, and (4) a nationally recognized author of a book related to the course content. Authors of selected readings and nationally known experts served as electronic mentors by joining the listserv briefly on four different occasions. The stimulus questions, two sample responses, and the professor's wrap-up comments were posted to the web for each discussion topic.

THE COMMUNITY

Currently accepted theories of cognitive development include the importance of social construction of knowledge among groups called "communities of learners." The creation of a community of learners who never met face-to-face provided the biggest challenge. Two methods were used to create a community: (1) list-serv discussions; (2) opportunity for cooperative learning activities. The first goal was to establish basic trust between the professor and students and among students themselves. Kerka (1996) suggested establishing the tone early, introducing participants and matching people. Price (1996) indicated that the teacher needs to keep in constant contact with students via e-mail. These suggestions were put into practice and were found to be helpful.

Since the course content focused on social and emotional development, it seemed congruent that the first listserv discussion focus on "feelings" about being enrolled in an experimental web-based asynchronous course. The responses to the listserv stimulus question seemed to open the door to sharing and the development of trust. However, most students seemed to need additional personal contact with the professor. Interestingly, almost every female student enrolled, not only participated in the e-mail discussion, but also made a phone call to the professor on the first day for reassurance; only one male called. After a few weeks, more men called, generally for information on procedures. After several conversations, the professor inquired of the male students as to whether they had also wanted contact and reassurance at the outset of the course. The response was a definite "yes." However, it seems that the males felt that seeking assurance signaled weakness and had to be repressed; consequently they sought contact under the guise of seeking "information." This experience highlights the sense of isolation and need for community among distance learners. It points also to the need to be sensitive to learners who do not aggressively seek contact.

The group dynamics of the list-serv discussions mimicked "real-life" classroom discussions. The dissonance between active, fluent contributors to discussion and less "talkative" ones seemed to be accentuated by the computer medium. A few students tended to dominate the discussion and as time went on, reticent students seemed to withdraw even more. On one occasion, one student sent a personal e-mail to another asking that individual to refrain from dominating the discussion.

MODES OF DELIVERY

Multiple modes of delivering information and stimulating self-directed learning experiences were used. Kerka (1996) and Ely (1996) pointed out the importance of using mixed modes of delivery. Lecture notes and large text-based materials were sent by snail mail as recommended by Armstrong (1996), thus reserving the use of the internet and e-mail for communication and information retrieval rather than information dissemination. Six videos and one audiotape, developed by the instructor and the university's educational technologies division, were also delivered via snail mail. Students paid a nominal fee to cover the

cost of copying the video and audio tapes. For each reading assignment, the instructor initiated listserv discussions with stimulus questions. We used only one listserv and it was for the purpose of student response to structured questions related to reading assignments. In the future, consideration might be given to the recommendation by Price (1996) that two listservs be used --a structured one for questions/answers and one for informal student interaction.

THE COURSE

The course FCD 5224: Social and Emotional Development in Children is a graduate course generally taken by students in child development and various fields of education.

Course content included the following topics:

* Socialization (10%)
* Peer relations (10%)
* Self-system (15%)
* Play (10%)
* Pro-social behavior (10%)
* Aggression (5%)
* Schools and social development (10%)
* Achievement motivation (10%)
* Emotional development (20%)

REQUIREMENTS AND EVALUATION

Requirements for successful completion of the course included (1)daily contributions to list serv discussions (25%), (2) five research reports which were e-mailed directly to the professor (25%), (3) 25 entries into a working portfolio of notes which were e-mailed to the professor (25%), and (4) a final project designed to promote synthesis and evaluation of multiple content areas (25%).

A question that arises frequently in regard to assessment of student learning in distance education courses is "security." Professors want assurance that students don't "cheat" on exams. However, the stated philosophy of the instructor involved a constructivist philosophy in which students used projects to demonstrate application, synthesis, and evaluation outcomes. No tests were administered. Students conducted projects which fulfilled and enhanced their ongoing job requirements and which could be subsequently used in their own professional settings. They were encouraged strongly to use non-text modes to share project results. Some students created photo essays, two created illustrated and printed brochures for use in professional counseling offices, one created a newsletter for a state-wide career education project, and one counselor (a former music teacher) composed music for use in groups of socially isolated children. Two of the extension agents conducted research to inform policies related to 4-H club achievement recognition. One extension specialist took advantage of the opportunity to design and publish a much needed module on parenting education for her state. Still another student chose to capitalize on her photographic skills by documenting knowledge gained via a photo essay. One sample project can be viewed at: http://infoserver.etl.vt.edu/~/FCD/fcd5224/essays/moira.html.

Lessons Learned:

1. Multiple presentation modes offer the opportunity to design learning experiences which are closely matched to learning objectives.

2. Students, even those experienced in e-mail, need easy access to a computer specialist who can offer technical support.

3. Group dynamics in asynchronous listserv discussions mimic real-time face-to-face interactions.

4. Asynchronous learning activities offer increased flexibility for adult learners, but they also require either (a) self-regulated, self-directed learners, or (b) strict deadlines monitored by the instructor (external control).

5. Self-directed learning skills need to be examined in conjunction with on-line teaching strategies.

6. The overall experience corroborates Hansen and Gladfelter's (1996) proposition that free standing distance education graduate courses for adult learners can be exciting and successful.

7. Our experiences corroborated findings by Harasim 1991 that technical problems at the beginning tend to diminish later, and that asynchronous conferencing leads to problems with deadlines.

8. The professor's experience also corroborated Kerka's (1996) observation that on-line courses require two to three times more delivery time.

9. Overall, the course was judged to be a successful experience with 13 of 15 students enrolled . However, had the class size been larger, it might have been very difficult to maintain a sense of community and to explicate management of communications, record-keeping, etc. As suggested by Simonson (1996) future research should address issues related to class size.

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